Fix on film

Warren Sonbert retrospective at SFMOMA

by Gary Morris

I had the privilege of sitting with Warren Sonbert (1947-1995) at some of San Francisco's press screenings in the several years that preceded his death at age 47 from AIDS. There was something inexpressibly charming in his furtive whispers under the film's dialogue — usually about how bad the film was. Sonbert was an old-school cinephile with wide knowledge of the field. He was also a formidable if failing presence, increasingly curdled by his disgust with the slick emptiness of what he had to review, but engaged enough, at least until the last few times I saw him, to drop daggerlike digs *sotto voce*. Those last times were painful to watch — crouching, his hands shading his eyes as if to ward off the world, he was obviously living in his own grim melodrama that must have made any onscreen high jinks seem tame indeed.

I knew him as a local San Francisco curmudgeon and critic, hurling barbs against such targets as the International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. I was also aware of his reputation as a master of avant garde cinema, but the films have always been hard to see, even by the subterranean standards of underground film. Our repeated attempts to watch his films together failed, and that particular chance died with their maker. Maybe it was just as well; much of his work (he made 18 short films) needed restoration, and this is finally happening, making it easier to assess his achievement now that the films look the way he made them. In a two-month, eight-program series, SFMOMA is retrospecting both newly restored and rediscovered works, along with films by his colleagues and influences (Brakhage, Warhol, Hitchcock) and panel discussions.

Sonbert hated the dogmatism of labels, and he rejected the one most widely applied to him: diarist. This is indeed too limiting to contain the work, which is much more ambitious than random visual jottings on celluloid.

Sonbert was an avid globetrotter, never without a movie camera. Many of the films — *Friendly Witness* (1989) and *Whiplash* (1995) are two — draw on this footage, transforming his trips into heady collages of experience: brief, gorgeous, sometimes whimsical images of everything from a dog on a high wire to handsome Bedouin men cleaning a carpet in the desert. This impressionistic approach, punctuated by classical music or Motown (The Supremes' kitsch-poignant "Where Did Our Love Go?" was a favorite), evokes a world of aching beauty and fleeting pleasure in a way that no linear narrative approach could. The films' short running times — most are in the 20- to 30-minute range, with only *Carriage Trade* (1972) approaching feature status — reinforce this sense of life as fleeting.

Courtesy Ascension Serrano, The Estate of Warren Sonbert

San Francisco avant-garde filmmaker Warren Sonbert in the 1960s.

Faraway, so close

Friendly Witness presents a series of brief, evocative images of celebration, ritual, and the poetry of everyday life, filmed locally in San Francisco and in various faraway places, but particularly the Middle East. Structured around a series of classic rock and r&b songs, the film is a summing-up of Sonbert motifs and images, some new, some drawn from previous works. Couples embracing (a favorite motif), gay men at play, kids climbing a tesseract, fireworks, rodeos, and other timeless celebrations — these are some of the tableaux that make up this 20-minute film. Sonbert is constantly seeking connections and disparities, for example in an Egyptian sequence showing Mick Jagger in shadowy profile, and then cutting to the Sphinx.

Another scene shows a little girl in silhouette, swinging at twilight, then cuts to a massive grid of freeways that can be read as both a dehumanizing construct and evidence of a pattern imposed by humanity on a chaotic world. The joy of being human, alive, and the need to fix that joy on film (and thus make it real) are constant themes in works that limn a fresh, unpredictable world of pure experience. Sonbert's musical interests (he was an opera — and Motown — queen) were no doubt helpful in orchestrating his visual symphonies.

In spite of Sonbert's failure to suffer fools gladly or otherwise, films like *Friendly Witness* and *Whiplash* have a sense of acceptance and sheer generosity that

page 52 ▶

Jack the archivist

'Sex, Drugs, and Mormons' at Yerba Buena Center

by Alex Robertson Textor

Film archivist, writer and film teacher Jack Stevenson will present two sets of films at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts this weekend, under the series title of *Sex, Drugs, and Mormons: Two Nights with Jack Stevenson.*

On Friday, October 27 at 8 p.m., he will present a series of drug-scare films. On Saturday, October 28 at 8 p.m. he will present three short films by Mormon filmmaker Wetzel O. Whitaker. Stevenson's presentations coincide with the recent publication of two of his books: *Addicted: The Myth and Menace of Drugs in Film* (Creation Books) and *Fleshpot: Cinema's Sexual Myth Makers and Taboo Breakers* (Critical Visions).

Sex, Drugs, and Mormons showcases educational films intended to influence young audiences away from drug usage and sexual behavior deemed inappropriate. These films were not commercial vehicles; the Whitaker films were not made to be viewed outside of a Mormon cultural circuit.

Drugs in the Classroom, the Friday night drug-scare film set, features four films. The program includes David Parker's *LSD-25* (1967), Sid Davis' *LSD - Trip or Trap* (1967), Mel Marshall's *Narcotics: Pit of Despair* (1967) and *Marijuana* (1968), an educational film narrated by none other than Sonny Bono. These films have been shown with some regularity through the years at art-house theatres. They have a reputation for overstating their message, and consequently have been widely lampooned.

A scene from *Marijuana — Weed with Roots in Hell*

The anti-drug films replay some of the most lurid dystopian fantasies of drug usage. In *LSD-25,* LSD users stare at the sun until they go blind. In Marijuana, a pot-smoker stares at himself in a mirror until his face turns into a rubber monster mask. Sonny Bono's question, "Why do ya think they call it dope?" from *Marijuana,* achieved near-legendary status among marijuana smokers in the 1970s. Bono seems like something of an ironic choice for narrator, especially given the widespread characterization of his voiceover as lethargic and drugged-out.

Missionary position

The *Sex and Mormons* portion of the series follows on Saturday night. The three highly melodramatic films in this series, *How Do I Love Thee?* (1970), *For Time or Eternity* (1970) and *Cipher in the Snow* (1973), share a pedagogical function with the anti-drug films, despite their different subject matter.

How Do I Love Thee? deals with

page 43 ▶

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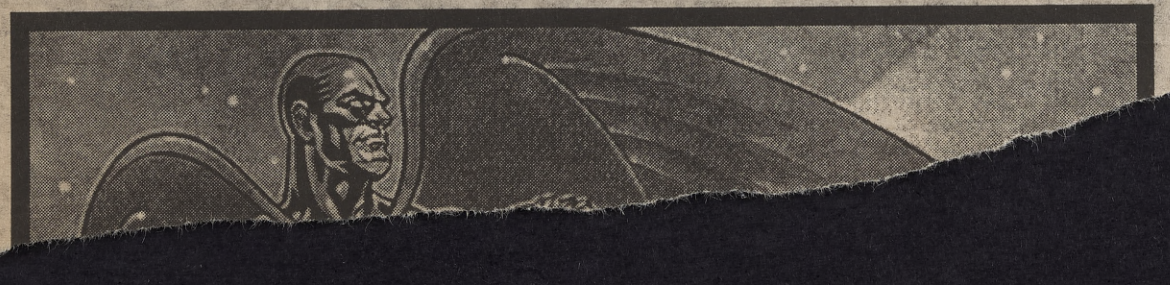
classic psychological profile of the co-dependent queer man who inadvertently falls into an obsessive relationship (i.e., heavy sex addiction) with a hot Latino research

...ut dick ...ates to the level of a ...e spell, cast by a skilled practitioner. And as Dean learns more about the object of his affection, he snorts more speed to prepare himself for the search-and-destroy mission he adopts.

don't have to go back again. Although there are a few continuity problems with the story, as it jumps back and forth in time, James Robert Baker's last novel is a tough, take-no-prisoners tribute to the author's skill as an observer of life and a storyteller. ▼

COULD SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN THE PRESCRIPTION DRUG PLANS AGAIN?
I WONDER IF I LOOK FAT IN THIS.
I WAS GOING TO GET MY NAILS DONE THAT DAY BUT...IF IT INVOLVES BUSH, COUNT ME IN.
JUST VOTE! NOVEMBER 7TH.



...ed their traditional Friday the 13th party for the first occurrence of that scary day in the new millennium (well, not *really*, but we'll get up on our soapbox in 2001). Spotted at the soirée: celebrated

"Behind every great woman, there is probably another, greater woman." Oh-ho, as the joke from **Christopher Guest**'s laff-riot *Best in Show* goes, looks like Boulevard has two mommies! ▼

Warren Sonbert

◀ *page* 41

makes them unique in experimental film. His rejection of middlebrow taste — "the hollow cupidity and superficiality of middle-class ideals," as he once said — did not prevent him from being expansive in rendering a world he often stood outside of.

Not all of the films follow the kaleidoscopic pattern of *Friendly Witness*. The rarely screened *Tenth Legion* (1967), perhaps named in tribute to his idol Douglas Sirk's *The First Legion*, focuses on sex, using Rembrandt-like lighting to render the bliss of bodies intertwined. Another of his masters, Hitchcock (specifically, *Marnie*), is the subject of a homage in his claustrophobic reduction of the Hollywood weepie, *A Woman's Touch* (1983).

Sonbert was also something of a prodigy, only 19 when he made *Amphetamine* (1966), with Wendy Appel. This 10-minute black-and-white ode to sex and drugs echoes the work of Warhol and Morrissey in luring the viewer into a self-consciously decadent, queer closed space. A booted boy is seen shooting up in methodical detail, and he and another boy passionately make out. The film makes no reference to the outside world, and its sheer insularity is rendered through the drone of an endlessly repeated "Where Did Our Love Go?" from a scratchy LP. The sense of transgressive pleasure is intense here, but also ephemeral; its brief running time evokes a sense of life as a temporary state. Like Sonbert's short life, it's a diversion that will end as surely — and quickly — as the secret pleasures it celebrates. ▼

***Friendly Witnesses: The Worlds of Warren Sonbert* screens in eight programs Oct. 26-Dec. 17 at SFMOMA, 151 3rd St. Films are free with museum admission.**

Porn

◀ *page* 47

sionate dildo-fuck...

While S...

But the results were ... all the way ...